

MY SAY: Soft power leadership

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Article

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Leadership seems to be among the hotly discussed issues of late, a subject of vital concern at all levels of organisations and nations. More so globally, what with a phenomenon called "Bush fatigue" which has set in, given the impending 2008 US presidential election on Nov 4. After all, for almost eight years now, the current US president George Bush has fallen short of global expectations, and in meeting world standards. This is in spite of Bush being the first US president to have an MBA degree!

One would have thought that Bush would be the most adept in learning from the many world-class US leadership gurus to whom the rest of the world look up to. One of them is Joseph S Nye Jr, who recently released a book titled *The Powers to Lead* (Oxford University Press 2008). Nye is university distinguished service professor at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, where he was formerly the dean. The author has also served in the US government in various capacities at high levels. He seems perfect to provide new leadership perspectives in addressing the present and future challenges.

Well-known for advocating "soft power" in his earlier book, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Public Affairs 2004), Nye reasserts that the authoritarian and coercive forms of leadership, based on archaic military-industrial hard power approaches, are, in this day and age, deemed inappropriate. In contrast, soft power options are fast gaining importance in today's post-industrial information societies. This shift is in sync with the rapidly changing context which requires what he terms as "contextual intelligence".

This means the ability to comprehend the changing global scenario, to capitalise on the trends, and to take advantage of the flow of events and, at the same time, putting in place the appropriate plans and strategies. In so doing, the leader seeks to inspire and persuade rather than force and intimidate. The hierarchical, unilateral command-and-control version of leadership is already being supplanted by networks, transparency, ethics and democracy. Arrogance, manipulateness and authoritarianism, regardless of how benevolent, is a matter of the past.

Nye writes, "The information revolution and democratisation are causing a long-term secular shift in the context of post-modern organisations - a shift along the continuum from command to co-optive style." The latter emphasises on the attractiveness of one's culture and values or the ability to frame the agenda in such a way that it makes others see the benefits accrued from the shared values expressed. It leverages on the respect for one's moral authority, as much as the legitimacy of the objectives intended.

In other words, much depends on contextual awareness and situational sensitivity as mustered by a leader. Here, Nye argues in his new book for "smart power" - the combination of hard and soft power skills in proportions that vary with different situations. Thus, more than just about exercising authority, he redefines leadership as a process that is facilitated by the proposed contextual intelligence. In a fast-changing world, this poses an enormous challenge to today's leaders.

Could this be one reason why there is so much confusion about what the needs of leadership are today? Particularly so when some are still insisting on the "old" ways for the sake of grandstanding - oblivious to the fact that the demographics are now more discerning. In short, the oft-alleged classic Machiavellian-type of leadership that preys on factors like "fear" must now be tempered to suit the demands of the post-modernity. Gone are the days where leaders are expected to thump their chest, rip up their shirt to reveal the all-mighty "S" symbol (or any other, for that matter) on the macho-like torso. Now is the time for a civil conversion to nurture the new leadership style of the knowledge era.

One such civil conversion must take into consideration the local cultural nuances inherent in the word *kepimpinan* which is grossly translated to mean "leadership". The subtle differences between the two are often lost in the translation, and thus cause a serious gap in understanding. Whereas the latter paints an image of someone at the top of the hierarchy, or being positioned at the front "leading" the pack, the former is distinct in meaning and action in that the root word *pimpin* conjectures the leader moving together at once with those who are being led. The leader, in other words, is at par with the rest if not for the respect rendered by his/her moral authority, and the legitimacy of the objectives intended, as well as the belief in common values.

Perhaps Nye is right about contextual intelligence, bearing in mind that the domain of leadership is not exclusive in nature without giving due respect to what is locally and culturally relevant, and its notion of smart power. That, of course, calls for a clear understanding of *kepimpinan* and not just leadership as we understand and practise it today.

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